

Semicontinuous
Ezek. 34:11–16,
20–24
Ps. 100

Complementary
Ezek. 34:11–16,
20–24
Ps. 95:1–7a

Eph. 1:15–23
Matt. 25:31–46

The Least of These

Goal for the Session

Tweens will explore the parable of the sheep and goats and broaden their understanding of loving and following Jesus.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Matthew 25:31–46

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Thomas D. Stegman, SJ

The last judgment scene is the final and climactic passage in Jesus’ discourse on the end times (Matthew 24:1–25:46). Matthew draws on imagery from Daniel 7:13–14—where the Ancient of Days bestows dominion and glory on “one like a son of man”—to set the stage for the full manifestation of God’s reign. Jesus is portrayed in his glorious return as a shepherd, an image Matthew employs throughout his Gospel. The picture of the Son of Man then morphs into the image of Jesus as king. Indeed, Jesus’ kingly/messianic identity is a major theme for Matthew.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Mark Douglas

The one who sits “on the throne of his glory” (v. 31) and has the power to separate the sheep from the goats is also the one who lends his identity to “the least of these.” Given not only the fluidity with which the Son of Man reveals his identity, but also his complex willingness to identify himself with those who live dependent on others, perhaps treating our own identities as more fluid and complex than we often do may remind us not to assume too much about ourselves, our places in this text, our relations to our neighbors, or our places in eternity.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” John M. Buchanan

“What you do for me and to the least of these—sick, hungry, homeless, oppressed, imprisoned—you do to me.” In these familiar words of Jesus are three important ideas. The first is about God: God is here, in the messiness and ambiguity of human life. The second is about the practice of religion: There is only one criterion, and that is whether or not you saw Jesus Christ in the face of the needy and whether or not you gave yourself away in love in his name. The third is personal: God wants to teach us the fundamental truth that to love is to live.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Lindsay P. Armstrong

The emphasis on freely sharing with all who are hungry, thirsty, naked, and/or sick is a key diagnostic tool to help assess our righteousness. If we cannot share freely and fully or if we do not make ourselves available to do so, this indicates that our relationship with God and the world is not as healthy and whole as Jesus’ triumph on the cross makes possible. Loving those for whom Jesus gave his life, particularly those who are undervalued, is a primary expression of our love of God and our experience of God’s love for us.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Matthew 25:31–46

YOU WILL NEED

- ☐ white cloth
- ☐ battery-powered candle
- ☐ *Singing the Feast*, 2023–2024; CD player
- ☐ Color Pack 8, 25, 26, 32
- ☐ Bibles
- ☐ copies of Resource Sheet 1
- ☐ gavel or wooden spoon
- ☐ newsprint
- ☐ markers
- ☐ newspapers and news magazines
- ☐ scissors, glue sticks

For Responding

- ☐ option 1: writing paper, envelopes, pens
- ☐ option 2: copies of Resource Sheet 2, envelopes, baskets, pens, scissors

In your discussions, avoid talking in terms of “us helping them.” We are called to journey together in compassion with all humanity. When we extend love to those we meet on the journey, we receive as well as give.

Focus on Your Teaching

Most tweens are aware of suffering and hardship in their communities and in the world. They want to help in meaningful ways, and some do just that. This session provides the opportunity to affirm how youth are already serving Jesus. The focus passage today emphasizes that it is not church attendance or right belief that are measures of faithful living, but how we care for others. This might be a comforting thought to tweens who are starting to question their faith and may not be sure what they believe at this point in time.

Incarnate God, as I explore the implications of this passage with these young people, help me grow in understanding of what it means to follow you. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome tweens by name. Encourage them to tell about their week, naming any joys and concerns.

Gather the group by playing or singing “I’m Gonna Sing When the Spirit Says Sing” (Color Pack 32; track 13 on *Singing the Feast*, 2023–2024). Arrange the white cloth in the center of your learning space and place the candle on it. Explain that the change of color indicates that today is Reign of Christ (or Christ the King) Sunday, the last Sunday of the church year. Light the candle. On this day, Christians rejoice that Jesus Christ is our leader and ruler—our King for all time. Pray aloud:

Loving God, as we celebrate that your Son, Jesus Christ, is our king, help us to grow and learn together about following him. Amen.

Introduce the focus scripture by drawing attention to Color Pack 8 and asking:

- ✂ How have you used your hands to help others this week?
- ✂ What good things can happen when people join hands?

**I'm Gonna Sing When
the Spirit Says Sing**

I'm gonna sing when the
Spirit says sing,
I'm gonna sing when the
Spirit says sing,
I'm gonna sing when the
Spirit says sing,
and obey the Spirit of the
Lord.

I'm gonna walk . . .

I'm gonna leap . . .

I'm gonna praise . . .

EXPLORING

Recall that in the section of Matthew's Gospel you are studying, Jesus is spending some time alone with his disciples before his death. He is talking to them about the end time. At the time of Jesus, it was believed that one day the present world would come to an end and the whole earth would turn to follow God. Remind the group that early Christians expected Jesus to return during their lifetime and usher in the end time. When Jesus did not return as expected, these early Christians began to get discouraged. Briefly review Matthew 25:1–30, observing that Jesus described the end time as being like a party. While we wait for the party to begin, we are to use our talents and abilities to extend God's love to others.

Ask learners to turn to Matthew 25 in their Bibles, helping one another as needed. Read aloud verses 31–33. Explain that the writer of Matthew's Gospel is using two images for Jesus. The first is the image of the "Son of Man," who comes in glory. Jesus is also portrayed as a shepherd, a common image of Jesus in the New Testament.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (On Trial) and ask for volunteers to read the parts of Jesus, the court official, and the lawyer. The rest of the group can be the crowd—have them practice making an excited buzz of conversation and confused murmurings. After the drama, return to Matthew 25 and read aloud verses 41–46. If you have time, you might do the drama a second time, changing it at the appropriate points to tell the story of verses 41–46. Discuss the story:

- ✂ What surprised you in the story?
- ✂ How did the king determine the difference between the sheep and the goats—the two groups of people?
- ✂ The people who first read Matthew's Gospel were waiting for Jesus to return. What did this story challenge them to do while they waited?
- ✂ What do you learn from this story about what it means to follow Jesus?

Show Color Pack 25 and 26, inviting comments about the images. Wonder together about the people in the pictures, asking:

- ✂ What story might each one of these people tell us?
- ✂ According to the parable, where would we find Jesus in these pictures?
- ✂ How might this awareness of Jesus' presence change the ways we treat those who are in need in some way?
- ✂ What might we do this week to practice what Jesus taught?

Print each of these phrases at the top of a sheet of newsprint: "hungry, thirsty, and without clothing," "stranger and homeless," "sick, lonely, or imprisoned." Invite learners to browse through newspapers and news magazines, looking for current situations where people are in need locally, nationally, or globally. Cut out headlines, articles, or pictures and glue them to the appropriate sheets. As you do this, encourage tweens to talk about what they might do to help bring some relief to these situations. Ask each tween to choose one situation to keep in her or his prayers during the coming week.

The Common English
Bible translates "Son of
Man" as "Human One."

**EASY
PREP**

RESPONDING

Mark the activities you will use:

1. **Letter** Jesus' parable calls us to serve those who are ignored and neglected. As a group, compose a letter to your congregation, telling why your group thinks it is important to act on Jesus' parable of the sheep and goats. Give some practical suggestions of ways to reach out to those who are in need, and include some thoughts about the things your group could do as young people. If you have a large group, you may wish to divide into smaller groups and write several letters. Find a way to distribute the group's letter with your congregation. You might print it in the worship bulletin, publish it on the church Web site or newsletter, or have it read during worship.
2. **Serving Others** Jesus' parable reminds us that when we serve others, we serve God. Give several copies of Resource Sheet 2 (I Was . . .) to each learner. Read through the suggestions of simple actions to take to show love to those who need help with the basic necessities of life. Encourage tweens to write an idea of their own in the blank box. Cut each sheet apart and seal the pieces in an envelope. Write "Advent Serving" on the outside of the envelopes and put them in a basket. Place the basket in a central location. Invite members of the congregation to take home an envelope and follow the suggestions inside during Advent. Be sure each tween takes home an envelope.
3. **Obstacle Race** Jesus' parable challenges us to live lives of compassion and love; sometimes that can be hard. Invite tweens to use supplies and furniture in your meeting space to create an obstacle course. Encourage creativity and safety. Have each learner go through the obstacle course at least once. Afterward, gather together and talk about how we sometimes encounter obstacles in our lives that prevent us from following Jesus. What obstacles or fears might hinder us from following Jesus' teaching in the parable of the sheep and the goats? What kinds of things could we do to get around those obstacles?

CLOSING

Gather around the worship space and ask tweens to tell one thing they learned today about living as Jesus' followers. Then invite learners to place their hands around Color Pack 8 in your worship space. Offer this prayer or one of your own:

God of love, thank you for stories that help us discover more about you and more about following in your loving ways. Help us to live and love as Jesus taught. Amen.

Lead the closing charge:

Leader: Let us go out and use our hands and hearts to serve Jesus.

All: Amen!

Extinguish the candle. As you say good-bye to each learner, promise to hold her or him in prayer during the coming week.

November 26, 2023
The Least of These

Teaching the Revised Common Lectionary
FEASTING on the WORD
CURRICULUM

Tweens
Resource Sheet 1

On Trial
Based on Matthew 25:31-40

Crowd: *(murmurs nervously)*

Court Official: *(bangs gavel)* The court will come to order.



Jesus: We have weighed the evidence that has been presented before this court and are ready to pronounce the verdict. First I will address the group on my right. I have carefully reviewed the evidence and find you worthy.

Crowd: *(buzzes excitedly)*

Court Official: Order! Order in the court *(bangs the gavel)*.



Jesus: You have continually shown love and compassion. I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me.

Crowd: *(confused murmurings)*

Court Official: Order! Order in the court *(bangs the gavel)*.



Jesus: I was naked and you gave me clothing. I was sick and you took care of me. I was in prison and you visited me.

Lawyer: Your honor, when did my clients see you hungry and give you food, or thirsty and give you something to drink? And when did they see you as a stranger and welcome you, or naked and give you clothing? And when did they see you sick or in prison and visit you?

Jesus: Truly I tell you; whenever they did these things for any person who is ignored or neglected, they did it for me.

Crowd: *(excited buzz of conversation)*

Court Official: Order! Order in the court *(bangs the gavel)*.



Jesus: Come, you who are blessed by God! Receive the inheritance prepared for you by our loving God.

November 26, 2023
The Least of These

Teaching the Revised Common Lectionary
FEASTING on the **WORD**
CURRICULUM

Tweens
Resource Sheet 2

I Was . . .



I was hungry . . .

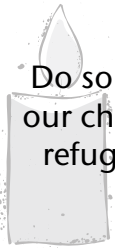
Look online for local and national groups who provide food for hungry people.

Buy some extra groceries to donate to a food bank this week.



I was thirsty . . .

Go to the WaterStep site (www.waterstep.org) and learn about one organization that provides clean water for those in need. Or contribute to a ministry that digs wells. Pray for those who thirst.



I was a stranger . . .

Do some research to find out how our church or denomination serves refugees arriving in our country. How might you help?

Watch for newcomers who visit our church. Make a point of introducing yourself and inviting them to fellowship hour or other special events.



I had no clothes to wear . . .

Buy socks and underwear to give to a local women's shelter or other agency that helps those who are in need.



I was sick . . .

Visit someone who is homebound and might appreciate some company. Make a commitment to pray for those who are sick.



Another way to serve those who are in need . . .